

THE HISTORY OF ABBREVIATED *IF*-STRUCTURES

- A DIACHRONIC CORPUS STUDY

BETWEEN 1500 AND 1990 -

1. Background and the problem

Dealing with topics in syntax and semantics from diachronic point of view has been popular amongst linguists, especially since the advent of computerised corpora. When first meeting the notion “abbreviated *if*-structures”, one might well assume that such structures are instances of subordinate and conditional clauses. Scholars have evinced continuous interest in the study of such clauses. Despite the rich literature on the topic and the works from various angles so far, there is still scope for further research into some unexplored areas, such as the development of “abbreviated *if*-structures”.

The present research originates from my earlier pilot-study focusing on the diachronic analysis of reduced adverbial clauses introduced by the subordinators *albeit*, *(al)though*, *if*, *unless*, *when*, *where*, *whether*. This study showed that in addition to the full subordinate clauses, all the subordinators can introduce elliptical clauses as well where they lack at least the finite verb. Omitting certain constituents from a sentence is not completely unknown before the Early Modern English period either. Already in the earliest times clause-reduction was possible, for instance in relative clauses (cf. Traugott 1972: 158-159). Since then, various ways of grammatical omission (ellipsis; cf. Quirk et al. 1985: §12) have been discussed.

A conjunction from the list above, *if* occurs not only in elliptical but in some other phrase-like structures as well. Hence, the focus is restricted to *if* and abbreviated *if*-structures in order to examine to what extent abbreviated *if*-structures can be treated as instances of ellipsis, and in which other ways it is possible to deal with the abbreviated quality of *if*-structures. Accordingly, the dissertation sets out to examine the diachronic development of different abbreviated *if*-structures, as in for example *yf not* in example (1) and *if any* in example (2), over the five centuries from 1500 to 1990.

- (1) so I truste that he wyll delyver me here owt of all my troubles, yf he so
see yt good. **Yf not**, hys wyl be done!
(date of origin: 1555; emphasis mine)
<PPCEME: MOWNTAYNE-E1-H,204.130>

- (2) Many antipyretic drugs were used, as we have already stated, but with little **if any** effect.
(date of origin: 1905; emphasis mine)
<ARCHER: 1905furt.m7b>

Abbreviated *if*-structures can be described as combinations of the conjunction *if* and an adverb (example (1)), a determiner (example (2)), or any other word class (an adjective, a noun, a pronoun, preposition or numeral, excluding the verb) or phrases with them. Example (1) is one of the earliest examples of abbreviated *if*-structures in the corpora examined and is one with conditional meaning. Later, from the late 16th century onwards, an increase in the functions (cf. Nevalainen 2006: 29) of abbreviated *if*-structures can be observed: besides the conditional one, also non-conditional interpretations (like the one in example (2)) start to spread. The conditional and non-conditional interpretations of abbreviated *if*-structures persist in the course of time and are still evident at the present day.

2. Previous findings and problems

2.1 Studies on ‘abbreviated *if*-structures’

The existing studies on *if*-clauses can be grouped into two main categories: one pertaining to the semantics of full *if*-clauses (i.e. such *if*-clauses that have a subject and a finite verb), the other one to abbreviated *if*-structures (i.e. *if*-structures lacking at least a finite verb). Research on the first group varies considerably in the scope. For instance, Comrie (1986) tries to identify the significant parameters in the cross-linguistic description of *if*-clauses. He claims that although clauses may look like typical conditional clauses, they can be interpreted differently, even without conditional connotation. Restricting her view to Early Modern English exclusively, Claridge (2007) discusses the possible interpretations of full *if*-clauses. She claims that *if*-clauses, besides their (true) conditional interpretation, might have so-called ‘hedging’ and metalinguistic functions as well. Furthermore, she also propounds a potential relationship between positioning of *if*-clauses in the sentence (initial, parenthetical or final) and their functions (conditional or metalinguistic), for instance. Horn (1989), Sweetser (1991) and Dancygier (1998) also point out that *if*-clauses are more complex than first expected: *if* can be interpreted both descriptively and metalinguistically. “Conditionality ‘means’ different things in different domains, and the degree of convergence between conditionality and topicality needs to be understood against the background of the basic content / epistemic /

speech-act ambiguity” (Sweetser 1991: 126). It seems that a dividing line should be drawn between conditionals with a truth function and conditionals with some other functions. To explore what domains can be applied to abbreviated *if*-structures is one of the aims of the present study.

When considering abbreviated *if*-structures, it should be noted that they have not been dealt with in full detail, still certain characteristics have already been highlighted. Of these, König (1986) only considers the phenomenon as such, but without much detail. While discussing conditionals, concessives and concessive-conditionals, he makes the remark of using *if* with a clear concessive meaning in the form of a parenthetical adjectival construction, as in example (3):

(3) This is an interesting, *if complicated*, solution.

(König 1986: 239; emphasis mine)

This is already an indication that the conjunction *if* can introduce not only conditional but also concessive clauses, even when the structure is abbreviated, “*if complicated*”. Dancygier (1998) also examines the phenomenon, and admits that the above-mentioned structure is concessive. Nonetheless, she maintains that not all of such abbreviated *if*-structures (e.g. *if* + adjective) should be considered as instances of the concessive; instead she suggests their analysis from the metatextual point of view (cf. Dancygier 1998: 103-107). Her argument is based on a sentence like the one in example (4), also containing an [*if* + adjective] combination, but with the addition of the negative particle *not*.

(4) The Queen of England is happy, *if not ecstatic*.

(Dancygier 1998: 104, 107)

She asserts that while the *if*-structure in example (3) has a concessive interpretation, the *if*-structure in example (4) (which resembles example (3)) has some commenting function on the previous word, without any concessive implication. It means that in example (4) *happy* (the weaker term) is not rejected, just questioned, and *ecstatic* (the stronger term) can be considered as an alternative to *happy*, maybe a potential repair (cf. Dancygier 1998: 107).

Although Dancygier (1998) describes conditionals of all kinds, including the above-mentioned metatextual conditionals extensively, she examines only Present-day English material, without any corpus evidence. Consequently, she provides no information concerning

the possible development of the above-mentioned *if*-structures with either the concessive or the metatextual interpretation.

In sum, it has been noted that different domains in semantics can be realised when full *if*-clauses are taken into consideration. Previous studies have also shown that this distribution of domains applies to abbreviated *if*-structures as well, but without paying attention to the ‘abbreviatedness’ as such. The intriguing question as to how and why these possible interpretations developed was at the root of the detailed and comprehensive research of abbreviated *if*-structures documented in the dissertation. Thus, the dissertation aimed at revealing hitherto unknown aspects of abbreviated *if*-structures by means of an overall analysis which considers syntactic and semantic issues.

3. Main research questions and hypotheses

The main goal is to follow the diachronic development of those abbreviated *if*-structures under the framework of diachronic typology, corpus linguistics and grammaticalisation, and by so doing to discuss the following questions:

- What is the ratio of the abbreviated *if*-structures to full *if*-clauses? Do they both show the same tendency in their use throughout the examined time period? (Chapter 2)
- What kind of variation can be detected at the level of syntax? That is, what is meant by ‘abbreviated *if*-structures’, and what kind of differences are there between seemingly similar structures? How are these structures realised? The hypothesis is that there is a difference between the abbreviated *if*-structures: some should be analysed as clauses and others as phrases. (Chapter 2)
- What interpretations can be associated with the individual abbreviated *if*-structures, starting out from the dual conditional – non-conditional division and continuing with the establishment of further categories within those groups? How have the possible meanings developed in the long diachrony, especially compared to each other? (Chapter 3)
- Are the abbreviated *if*-structures position-sensitive? Is there a direct connection between the positioning of the abbreviated *if*-structures and their functions in the sentence? (Chapters 2 and 4)

- Are intra- or extra-linguistic factors determinants in the development of the different categories, or is it rather a combination of both? (Chapter 2)
- Are the abbreviated *if*-structures text type-sensitive? (Chapter 4)
- How could grammaticalisation – pragmaticalisation – lexicalisation theories explain the spread of the abbreviated *if*-structures, especially knowing that not only words and phrases but also clauses can be sources of pragmaticalisation and thus of pragmatic markers (Brinton 2008: 27, Fischer 1992: 347)? (Chapter 5)

The extensiveness of the above-mentioned approaches, including diachrony and corpus linguistics puts me in a good position to pinpoint differences or perhaps discrepancies between various sources, such as corpora and dictionaries. The present study is based on the analysis of two diachronic corpora, the *PPCEME* and the *ARCHER*, with the help of which I attempt to prove first that a structure is very much context-dependent. In other words, not all the abbreviated *if*-structures are instances of subordination, but sometimes they should be analysed as phrases and not as clauses, and they are not necessarily to be analysed as conditionals. Furthermore, I shall also show that during the five centuries (1500-1990) the change that took place can be attributed to grammaticalisation, for instance. To discuss the questions and also to argue for the validity of my hypotheses, I will provide a two-level analysis comprising syntax and semantics.

4. Structure

The dissertation comprises six chapters following the general introduction: in **Chapter 1** I discuss the methods and materials applied in the present study. **Chapter 2** is devoted to syntactic questions: I start out from *if*-structures in general and arrive at the discussion of abbreviated *if*-structures. I discuss the question of non-finite or verbless structures, the notion of ellipsis and then the problem of subordination in the area of abbreviated *if*-structures. Besides, I also try to detect regularities in the positioning of abbreviated *if*-structures. In **Chapter 3** I discuss the conditional and non-conditional ways of classifying abbreviated *if*-structures. I start out from full *if*-clauses and then arrive at the different interpretations of abbreviated *if*-structures (conditionals as against non-conditionals, i.e. concessive structures, scalar comments and pragmatic markers). In **Chapter 4** I combine the form with the function of abbreviated *if*-structures with considering also their variation in the different text types. In **Chapter 5** I consider the possibility of grammaticalisation, lexicalisation and

pragmaticalisation in the development of the abbreviated *if*-structures. Finally, **Chapter 6** is devoted to the overall conclusion of the dissertation.

5. Methods and Materials

Since the present study aims at discovering how abbreviated *if*-structures were changing and developing in the English language in the course of time, corpus linguistics, more precisely, the combination of historical and corpus linguistics seems to be the most appropriate way to achieve that goal. The reason for this is that “[l]anguage is a human activity, not an epiphenomenon of a static capacity” (Brinton & Traugott 2005: 3, cf. Lehmann 1993: 320), and thus linguistic changes can only be detected in the course of time. Therefore, the analysis of *historical* documents is considered as means of accessing empirical evidence (cf. Fischer 2004: 730). Without empirical evidence, theories would remain simple theories without appropriate support. Electronic historical corpora are a source of historical documents facilitating the investigation of linguistic variation (cf. Biber & Jones 2009: 1291).

My choice fell on the analysis of electronic corpora, since they “give easy access to info about linguistic contexts for change, frequency, and other factors ...” (Brinton & Traugott 2005: 8), and they also make it possible for “the researcher to observe numerous tokens of the linguistic feature in natural contexts” (Biber & Jones 2009: 1291). Thus, a diachronic analysis can be well supported by corpus findings “in that it provides an empirical methodology for investigation processes of language change in progress” (Nevalainen 2004: 2). This is possible since structured electronic corpora provide improved possibilities for a many-sided analysis. Within the framework of the present study, they allow a reassessment and a comprehensive study of the abbreviated *if*-structures, from the diachronic, the regional and the text type aspects (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 137, Nevalainen 2004: 13-14).

However, the data obtained from the corpora should not be treated as a ‘real’ picture of a language. Thus, only *tendencies* can be seen from which linguists might be able to set up various hypotheses, and the corpus data “can be used as evidence for claims about the properties of the language system or speaker competence” (Hiltunen 2010: 92; see also Evert 2006: 178). As a result, additional subject matters might also be induced, also with the requirement of further, maybe even more thorough analyses.

Since one of the aims of the present dissertation is to give a *general* overview of the development and the variation of the abbreviated *if*-structures in the *long diachrony*, the

corpora were chosen accordingly. The original idea was that the development of the abbreviated *if*-structures should be followed from their earliest occurrence until the present day, and so two corpora were chosen: the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* (PPCEME, from 1500 until the early 1700s) and *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (ARCHER, from the late 1600 until 1990).

The *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* resembles very much the *Helsinki Corpus*. It is also divided into three sub-periods: E1: 1500–1569, E2: 1570–1639, E3: 1640–1710, but those contain more material than the sub-periods of the *HC*. In the corpus there are a number of text types, such as Bible, Travelogue Diary, private Drama, comedy, Letters, private and non-private, Fiction, Law, Educational treatise, Handbook, other, Sermon, Philosophy, Biography, autobiography and other, Science, medicine and other.

Similarly to the PPCEME, *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (ARCHER) provides a distribution according to time (century-by-century) as well as text type. The ARCHER corpus thus provides material for manifold analyses and conclusions. The corpus has the timeline from the 15th to the 20th century, divided between four sub-periods: I.: 1650–1699, II.: 1700–1799, III.: 1800–1899, and IV.: 1900–1990. Concerning the text type distribution, altogether nine text types are available, namely, *drama*, *fiction*, *sermon*, *journal/diaries*, *medicine*, *news*, *science*, *letters* and *legal text*. Furthermore, the ARCHER corpus also facilitates regional search in its British and American parts which is not present in the PPCEME.

Besides following a diachronic line, using two corpora also makes it possible to carry out analyses based on text types. Since the ARCHER is considered to be the continuation of the PPCEME, the “basic sameness of a text type in the course of the centuries” can be expected (Kohnen 2001: 198), and thus the text types can be compared.

These analyses contribute to a research which can be considered as a ‘corpus-driven’ approach (Gast 2006: 114, also 115; cf. Tognini-Bonelli 2001, Storzjohann 2005).

In order to retrieve data from the corpora, the *Word Smith* search engine was used. With the help of this tool, there is no need to read through the whole text samples, only the relevant parts are highlighted by the system and can then be put under scrutiny. In order to acquire all the possible instances of *if*, all its spelling variants were looked for (cf. *OED* sv. *if*). Even though a part of the analysis is built on an already parsed and tagged corpus (PPCEME, see section 1.2.1), the search was carried out in the non-annotated version.

Since the present study is a bottom-up inductive approach, the abbreviated *if*-structure forms the basis of all further analysis, both on the level of syntax and semantics. Therefore, it

seemed to be more expedient to go through all the *if*-instances¹ appearing in the corpora and thus avoid the risk of missing any abbreviated *if*-structure. This was only possible by searching for *if* or any of its spelling variant. This, however, resulted in not only abbreviated *if*-structures but also full *if*-clauses. After excluding² all full *if*-clauses, which outnumbered the instances of abbreviated *if*-structures in both corpora, only the abbreviated *if*-structures remained for classification.

Although the frequency of a linguistic feature can be measured in different ways, I utilised a “Type C design” where the aim is “to compute rates of occurrence of linguistic features in each subcorpus” (Biber & Jones 2009: 1290 and 1301). According to this design, the corpus or sub-corpus is treated as one single unit. Having this in mind, two options are possible in the frequency analysis:

- (a) when the frequency count applies to the whole (sub-) corpus
- or
- (b) when the frequency count applies to one text type only within the (sub-) corpus.

The syntactic and semantic classification of abbreviated *if*-structures was done after the analysis.

4. Findings: main theses and answers to research questions

In my dissertation the aim was to assess the structure as well as different interpretations of abbreviated *if*-structures by looking at two diachronic corpora, the *PPCEME* and the *ARCHER*, covering a time period between 1500 and 1990. This extended time frame allowed the reader to get an insight into a small part of the changes going on then.

When comparing abbreviated *if*-structures and full *if*-clauses in the *PPCEME* and in the *ARCHER* corpora, it could be generally concluded that their developments in the long diachrony differ. As shown by Figure 1, the frequency of full *if*-clauses can be characterised by a declining tendency in most of the sub-periods. At the same time, the frequency of abbreviated *if*-structures in the two corpora slowly but continuously increases until the 18th century, and it starts to decrease towards the 20th century. The variation in the frequencies,

¹ There was no reason to carry out cluster analysis, since there is only a limited number of recurring structures, e.g. *if possible*, *if not*, *if so*, *if at all*, and *if ever*.

² Although full *if*-clauses were excluded from further analysis, they were considered in determining the ratio between full and abbreviated *if*-structures.

however, is rather minimal. Nevertheless, the increase in the frequency of abbreviated *if*-structures in some periods might be attributed to the declining use of full *if*-structures. The question whether abbreviated *if*-structures really take over the place of full *if*-clauses in certain cases might be answered with the thorough semantic analysis of full *if*-clauses as well.

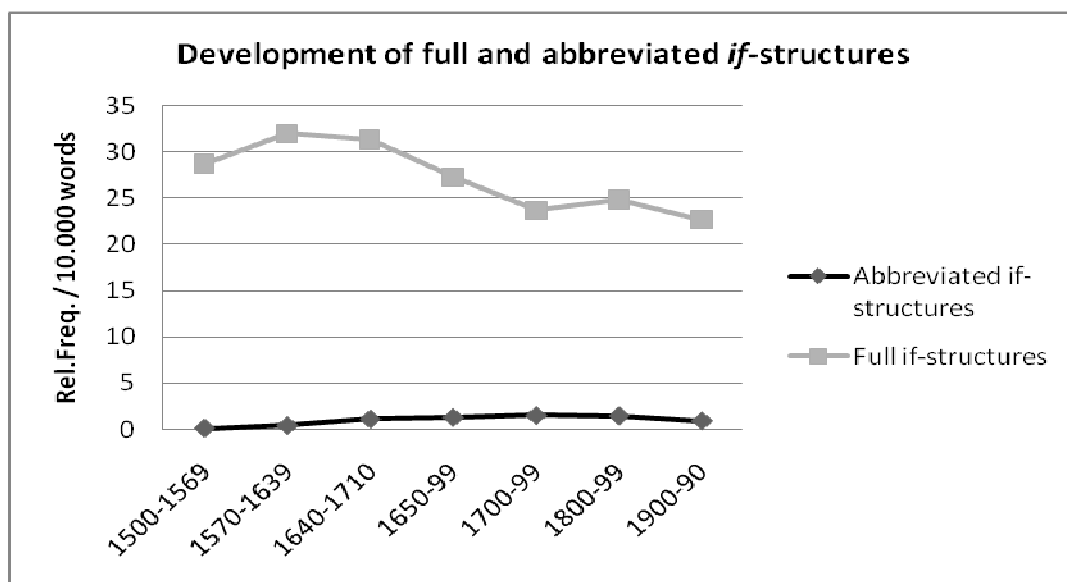


Figure 1.
Diachronic development of full and abbreviated *if*-structures from 1500 to 1990

In the examination of abbreviated *if*-structures first the question of how they became abbreviated was raised. First, I pondered upon the possibility of contact influence (Latin, French) concerning the structure being abbreviated, but due to the lack of evidence, this was ruled out. Second, the notion of ellipsis seemed to be a straightforward answer for the question; nevertheless, after the examination of the *if*-structures with context, it turned out that there are different ways to approach the syntax of abbreviated *if*-structures. It was ascertained that these structures can be either non-finite or verbless, with the latter option being the more prominent one. In the case of non-finite structures the [*if* + *past participle*] combination is the most frequent, while in the case of verbless structures it is the [*if* + *Adjective Phrase*] combination.

Although abbreviated *if*-structures look similar to each other in form (i.e. being either non-finite or verbless), it does not necessarily imply that they should be treated in the same way. Against the generally accepted idea that a structure being non-finite or verbless is an instance of ellipsis and is subordinate to its matrix by definition (cf. section 2.6, Quirk et al. 1985: 992), I suggested two ways to differentiate between the structures:

- (a) There are abbreviated *if*-structures which are more like full *if*-clauses in an abbreviated form, i.e. lacking at least a finite verb. These structures are definitely instances of ellipsis and they should be treated as dependent clauses. They do have an antecedent to which they are syntactically connected, and with the help of which it is possible to make a full clause out of the elliptical structure. They are part of the information flow and they have their specific position in the information structure.
- (b) There are abbreviated *if*-structures which cannot be considered as instances of ellipsis, since they do not have an antecedent in the preceding text on which they would be dependent; rather, they stand on the periphery and they do not form a part of the information flow. Moreover, they are not syntactically, but logically connected to the (parts of) preceding text.

Thence, in order to differentiate between these two types of structures, I introduced two terms: (a) elliptical and (b) truncated *if*-structures.

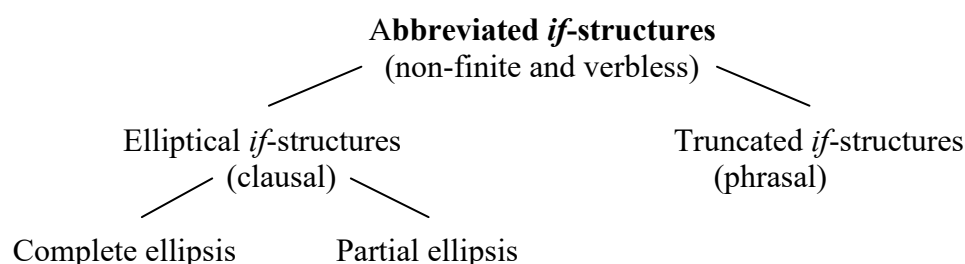


Figure 2.5
The types of abbreviated *if*-structures

Within ellipsis two further groups were established, namely complete and partial ellipses. In the first case, the whole clause is ellipted, in the second case, only part of it is, but definitely the finite verb. These elliptical *if*-structures behave like their full clause counterparts both syntactically and semantically, hence they are interpreted as full conditional clauses. However, the non-dependent nature of truncated *if*-structures can be seen in their interpretation as well: they do not set any kind of conditionality, that is, they cannot be considered as causes or reasons for what is mentioned in the main clause. Consequently, based on the evidence provided by the two corpora, the development of abbreviated *if*-

structures seems to be more context-dependent (intra-linguistic) rather than dependent on the influence of other languages (extra-linguistic).

To determine the possible factors in influencing the development of the possible functions of abbreviated *if*-structures, first I considered the origin of the conjunction *if*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, two sources are plausible for the origin of *if*: it can be understood either as a marker of conditionality or of *doubt, hesitation* (cf. section 1.1.1, *OED s.v. conj.*).

Continuing with the semantic analysis of the abbreviated *if*-structures in the *PPCEME* and the *ARCHER*, conditional and non-conditional interpretations were differentiated in the first place. The distribution of conditional and non-conditional abbreviated *if*-structures in the *PPCEME* and *ARCHER* corpora is 62% as against 38%, as shown in Figure 6.2.

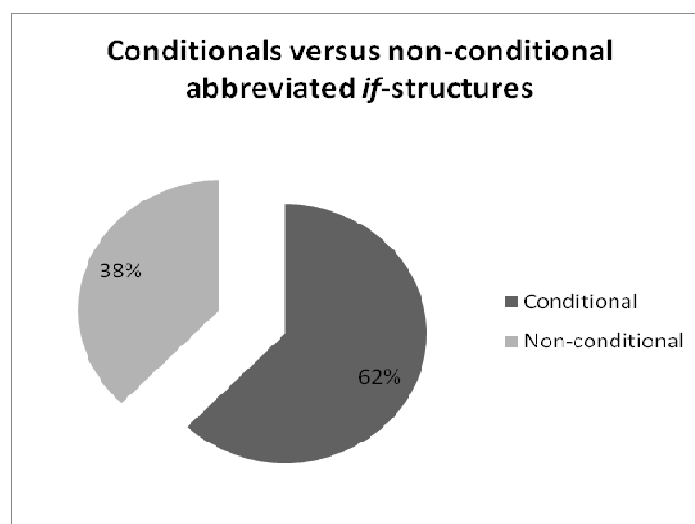


Figure 6.2
The distribution of conditional and non-conditional abbreviated *if*-structures from 1500 to 1990

It was pointed out that by examining exclusively the abbreviated *if*-structures, no further types within the category of conditionals was established. However, the non-conditional structures were categorised into three main sub-types:

- *if*-structures with concessive interpretation
- *if possible* as a pragmatic marker
- *if*-structures as scalar comments.

It is possible to set up further sub-categories in the case of scalar comments (positive and negative) and the pragmatic marker (deontic and non-deontic). Within the non-conditional

abbreviated *if*-structures it is the scalar comment which is most prominent, but the pragmatic marker *if possible* started spreading too (the instances with pragmatic interpretation outnumber the conditional interpretation of *if possible*).

There is a point where the syntactic and semantic characteristics meet: different interpretations abbreviated *if*-structures seem to be position-sensitive to a certain extent:

- complete elliptical *if*-structures occur exclusively in sentence initial position,
- partial elliptical *if*-structures can occur in sentence initial, medial and final positions; most frequent position is the sentence-medial,
- *if*-structures with concessive interpretation stand sentence-medially or –finally, however, initial position is also possible,
- *if possible* as a pragmatic marker occupies medial position in the majority of cases; there is, however, one instance in final and one instance in initial position. (In the test search of the *BNC*, however, the initial position seemed to be the most decisive),
- *if*-structures as scalar comments stand mostly in medial position, but final position is also possible.

Further connections between form and function were also highlighted: elliptical structures can be either conditional or concessive, and truncated structures can be either scalar comments (both positive and negative) or the pragmatic marker *if possible*.

An initial hypothesis was the possibility that abbreviated *if*-structures might be text-type (or even author) sensitive, which was then refuted by corpus results. It has turned out that abbreviated *if*-structures occur in all the different text types covered by the two corpora, albeit with varying frequency. From a general point of view, conditional abbreviated *if*-structures outnumbered the non-conditional ones in all the text types, but only with a minor margin. When the conditional and non-conditional abbreviated *if*-structures were compared to each other in the text types shared by the *PPCEME* and the *ARCHER*, it became evident that it was the text type *science other* where both types of abbreviated *if*-structures occurred the most frequently (cf. Figure 6.3).

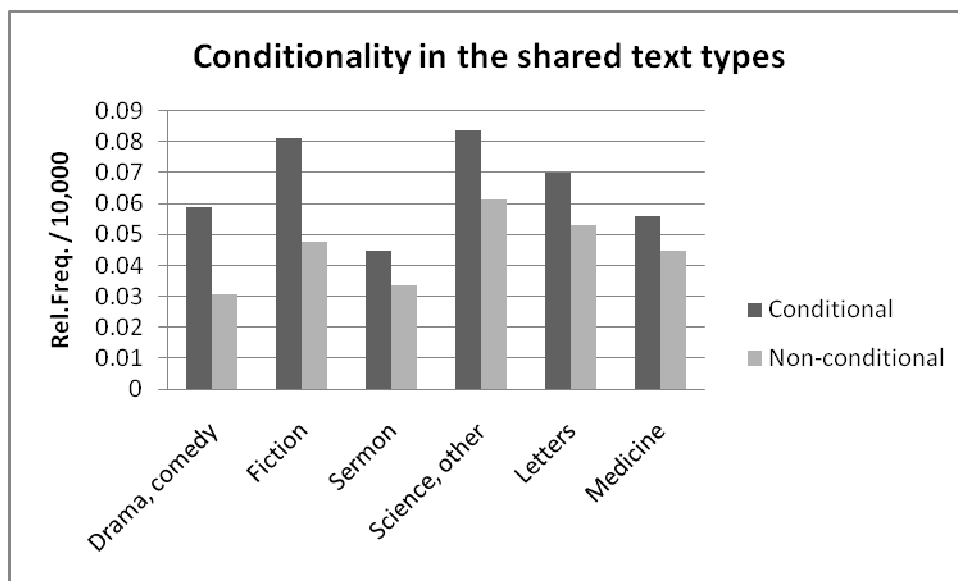


Figure 6.3
The distribution of conditionality in the shared text types

The assumption that the abbreviated *if*-structures are instances of grammaticalisation was partially validated, and thus the abbreviated *if*-structures were considered to be only weakly grammaticalised. The hypothesis was that some elliptical structures have since developed into set phrases. Thence the changes in certain abbreviated *if*-structures could also be attributed to lexicalisation: negative scalar comments (e.g. *if any*, *if at all*, *if ever*) and the pragmatic marker *if possible* are lexicalised *set phrases*, and positive scalar comments (i.e. [*if not* +...]) could be treated as lexicalised *set constructions*. It was also put forth that pragmaticalisation took place in the case of *if possible*; however, besides the pragmatic implication, also the conditional interpretations of *if possible* could be found.

5. Perspectives

The present dissertation is a descriptive study with the aim of opening up new areas of research into *if*-clauses and conditionals. The results presented in the study can be seen as remarkable tendencies as opposed to definite or categorical rules, and these could be either supported if more materials were taken into consideration (i.e. including more corpora from various time periods, specialised corpora). However, the various queries raised in the work offer interesting prospects for follow-up research, not only related to the English language, but also to cross-linguistic studies (as in languages like German, Italian). Besides, it also might be beneficial to have a semantic analysis of full *if*-clauses as well as to compare the

different realisations of conditionals (apart from *if*-conditionals). Furthermore, in order to obtain an overall picture of abbreviated structures, it might be worth considering other conjunctions as well. Finally, language teaching could also benefit from this study by examining different ways of interpreting abbreviated *if*-structures.

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